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The Chinese Rites Controversy and Its Relevance

Abstract

The Chinese Rites Controversy concerned the compatibility of Chinese practices, such as ancestor veneration and Confucius worship, with Catholic doctrine. In the 17th century, Jesuits deemed these rituals secular and adapted Christianity to Chinese culture, while Dominicans and Franciscans opposed this approach, arguing it led to syncretism. Following extended disputes, the Holy See prohibited these practices, weakening Catholic missions in China and straining relations with the West. In the 20th century, the Church revised its stance, recognizing the rituals as consistent with Christian faith, which became foundational for the theology of inculturation. Contemporary implications of the controversy are evident in Vatican-China relations, particularly regarding the sinicization of religion, which aligns religious practices with state ideology. Pope Francis's diplomatic initiatives, such as the agreement on episcopal appointments, reflect efforts to find a compromise, though tensions persist. The controversy remains relevant as an example of tensions between the universality of Christianity and local cultures, emphasizing the need for cultural dialogue and understanding diversity amidst global challenges.

Keywords: Chinese rites controversy, inculturation, Sinicization of religion, Vatican – China relations.

Spór o ryty chińskie i jego aktualność

Abstrakt

Spór o ryty chińskie dotyczył zgodności chińskich praktyk, takich jak kult przodków i oddawanie czci Konfucjuszowi, z nauką Kościoła katolickiego. W XVII w. jezuita uznali te rytuały za świeckie, dostosowując chrześcijaństwo do chińskiej kultury. Dominikanie i franciszkanie sprzeciwiali się temu, twierdząc, że prowadzi to do synkretyzmu. Stolica Apostolska, po licznych kontrowersjach, zakazała tych praktyk, co osłabiło misję katolicką w Chinach i wpłynęło na ich relacje z Zachodem. W XX w. Kościół zmienił stanowisko, uznając rytuały za zgodne z wiarą chrześcijańską, co stało się fundamentem teologii inkulturacji. Współczesne implikacje sporu są widoczne w relacjach Watykanu z Chinami, zwłaszcza w kontekście sinizacji religii, która podporządkowuje praktyki religijne ideologii państwowej. Dyplomatyczne działania papieża Franciszka, takie jak porozumienie dotyczące mianowania biskupów, pokazują próbę znalezienia kompromisu, choć relacje pozostają napięte. Spór pozostaje aktualny jako przykład na-

pięć między uniwersalizmem chrześcijaństwa a lokalnymi kulturami oraz wskazuje na konieczność dialogu kulturowego i zrozumienia różnorodności w obliczu globalnych wyzwań.

Słowa kluczowe: spór o rytę chińskie, inkulturacja, sinizacja religii, relacje Watykan – Chiny.

The Chinese Rites Controversy (Latin: *Controversia de ritibus sinensibus*, Chinese: 中国礼仪之争) refers to a prolonged theological, cultural, and political conflict that erupted in the 17th and 18th centuries within the Catholic Church. It arose between Western Catholic missionaries and the Qing dynasty concerning the compatibility of traditional Chinese rituals with Catholic doctrine. This controversy revolved around the issue of cultural accommodation in Christian missions in China, particularly whether traditional Chinese religious and social practices, such as ancestor veneration and the worship of Confucius, could be accepted within Christianity.

The controversy holds not only historical significance but also impacts contemporary relations between the Christian West and Chinese culture, politics, and religions. The central question of the debate was whether Christian missionaries could permit Chinese converts to participate in certain traditional rituals and ceremonies, which had religious undertones but were also considered integral elements of Chinese culture. This question remains relevant today, albeit in a modified form: to what extent can Chinese Christians express their faith through their own culture, employing Chinese philosophical concepts and cosmology? Conversely, to what extent must they abandon Chinese cultural frameworks to adopt concepts rooted in the European cultural heritage, shaped by the Semitic-Greek Bible and philosophy? This inquiry extends to a broader issue: to what degree can Christianity, in its claim to universality, be authentically expressed across diverse cultures and philosophies?

State of Research

The Chinese Rites Controversy is extensively documented, particularly in English- and Chinese-language literature. However, in Polish-language works, it is addressed only sporadically, with no in-depth articles or monographs available.

Among the essential studies on this topic, George Minamiki's monograph, *The Chinese Rites Controversy from Its Beginning to Modern Times*, stands out as one of the most comprehensive accounts of the controversy, not only in relation to China but also its implications for Japan and other East Asian

nations.¹ The Chinese perspective on this issue is well-articulated by Professor Li Tiangang of the Fudan University Philosophy Department, a specialist in religious studies. His book, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: History, Documents, and Significance*, provides a detailed analysis of this historical event, highlighting its importance for the history of China (particularly during the Ming and Qing dynasties), Church history, cultural exchanges between East and West, and comparative theological studies.² Li underscores that this controversy was not limited to religious issues but also constituted a significant cultural exchange event, profoundly influencing the intellectual history of China.

In earlier periods, the controversy attracted more attention from Western authors than Chinese scholars. Today, however, the reverse is true, as Chinese academics engage more actively with this subject, as exemplified by the works of Nicolas Standaert.³

The French sinologist Jacques Gernet, while not dedicating a specific study to the Chinese Rites Controversy, examined the initial interactions between Christianity and Chinese thought in his seminal work on their first confrontation. This study is considered a classic in the field.⁴ Additionally, R. R. Noll's compilation of 100 pivotal historical documents related to the controversy, translated into English, provides valuable resources for researchers.⁵ Another significant contribution is the multi-author volume edited by D. E. Mungello, published in the *Monumenta Serica* series in Sankt Augustin.⁶ In Polish literature, Robert Klarecki's book, *The Vatican's Policy Towards China: Past, Present, and Future*, is noteworthy. Although it offers a broader perspective, it dedicates several chapters to the accommodation controversy.⁷

¹ George Minamiki. 1985. *The Chinese Rites Controversy. From Its Beginning to Modern Times*. Michigan: Loyola University Press.

² 李天纲 (Li Tiangang). 1998. 中国礼仪之争。历史·文献和意义 [The Chinese Rites Controversy: History, Documents, and Significance]. 上海 (Shanghai): 上海古籍出版社 (Shanghai People's Publishing House).

³ 钟鸣旦 (Nicolas Standaert). 2021. 礼仪之争中的中国声音 [Chinese Voices in the Rites Controversy]. Trans. 陈妍蓉 (Chen Yanrong). 上海 (Shanghai): 上海人民出版社 (Shanghai People's Publishing House).

⁴ Jacques Gernet. 1991. *Chine et Christianisme. La Première Confrontation*. Paris: Édition Gallimard.

⁵ R. R. Noll. Ed. 1992. *100 Roman Documents Relating to the Chinese Rites Controversy (1645–1941)*. San Francisco: Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History.

⁶ D. E. Mungello. Ed. 1994. *The Chinese Rites Controversy. Its History and Meaning*. Sankt Augustin: Steyler Verlag, Nettetal.

⁷ Robert Klarecki, 2014. *Polityka Stolicy Apostolskiej wobec Chin. Przeszłość, terażniejszość i przyszłość* [The Vatican's Policy Towards China. Past, Present, and Future]. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Mado, 101–165.

While numerous global studies address the Chinese Rites Controversy, few consider its contemporary relevance. Additionally, Polish theological and sinological literature – apart from a few exceptions⁸ – pays insufficient attention to this critical topic.

Origins and Development of the Controversy

In 1582, Italian Jesuits Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci arrived in Zhaoqing, Guangdong Province, marking the beginning of the modern era of Catholic missions in China. Jesuit missionaries, such as Matteo Ricci, aimed to adapt Christianity to Chinese culture and traditions. Ricci, tailoring his methods to the requirements of Chinese society, accepted practices like ancestor veneration and Confucian worship, considering them secular expressions of respect for ancestors and sages rather than acts of religious worship. Ricci's strategy, known as the "Ricci Rules," became the cornerstone of Jesuit activities in China.

However, after Ricci's death in 1610, internal Church controversies arose. Dominicans and Franciscans, who arrived in China later, argued that tolerating such practices led to religious syncretism and contradicted Catholic principles. They criticized the Jesuits for their excessive flexibility, which eventually escalated into what became known as the "Chinese Rites Controversy."

Within the Catholic Church, two opposing positions emerged: the Jesuits contended that ancestor veneration and Confucian worship were secular rituals compatible with Catholic doctrine and should be tolerated. In contrast, the Dominicans and Franciscans deemed these practices irreconcilable with Church teachings, filing formal complaints with the Pope.

The Holy See's first response to these disputes came in 1645, when Pope Innocent X issued a decree prohibiting Chinese Catholics from participating in ancestor and Confucian rituals. However, the Jesuits persuaded Pope Alexander VII to mitigate the prohibition in 1656, provided these rites were not religious in nature. This controversy influenced Catholics not only in China but also in other parts of Asia, such as Japan and India.

⁸ Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki. 2022. Teologiczna periodyzacja dziejów Kościoła w Chinach [A theological periodization of the history of the Church in China]. In *Patrimonium Ecclesiae Christi tradere. Księga pamiątkowa dedykowana księdzu biskupowi Janowi Kopcowi z okazji 75-lecia urodzin, 50-lecia prezbiteratu, 30-lecia sakry biskupiej i 40-lecia pracy naukowej*. Vol. 1: De persona. Eds. Piotr Górecki, Jan Pyka, 829–850. Opole: Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego; Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki. 2005. "Problem przekładu imion biblijnych na język chiński w «Biblii Bożonarodzeniowej» [The Problem of Translating Biblical Names into Chinese in the "Christmas Bible"]." *Studia Oecumenica* 18: 333–348; Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki, 2005. "Świat Biblii i świat cywilizacji chińskiej" [The world of the Bible and the World of Chinese Civilization]. *Studia Oecumenica* 5: 363–372.

By 1644, when the Manchu forces seized power, Catholicism had been present in China for 62 years. Jesuits like Johann Adam Schall von Bell gained the trust of the Qing court, contributing to calendar reforms, which facilitated the Church's growth.

In 1665, Yang Guangxian published critical texts about Schall's calendar work, leading to Schall's arrest and a setback for Catholic missions in China. During Emperor Kangxi's reign, however, Schall was rehabilitated, and missionaries regained some influence. Yet the controversy persisted, with the Holy See repeatedly altering its position.

In 1692, Emperor Kangxi issued a tolerance edict allowing missionary activity, marking the zenith of their influence. However, with the arrival of Dominicans and Franciscans who opposed tolerance toward Chinese rituals, the conflict intensified. In 1704, Pope Clement XI, influenced by these groups, issued a decree forbidding participation in Chinese rites and required all missionaries in China to swear allegiance to this prohibition. The papal encyclical *Ex Illa Die* of 1715 reaffirmed this decree, threatening excommunication for noncompliance.

Emperor Kangxi, previously supportive of Jesuits and Catholicism, viewed Clement XI's decree as interference in China's internal affairs. In 1721, after reviewing the papal prohibition, he declared that "Westerners do not understand Chinese culture" and banned missionary activity in China. His successor, Emperor Yongzheng, enacted strict laws in 1723 outlawing Christianity, resulting in widespread persecution, missionary expulsions, and the onset of a prolonged period of repression against Catholics.

The prohibition of missionary activity persisted until the mid-19th century. Following the Opium Wars and the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, Western missionaries were allowed to resume their work in China. However, the Chinese Rites Controversy remained unresolved until the 20th century.

In 1939, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith issued the instruction *Plane Compertum Est*, permitting Catholics to participate in ancestor veneration and Confucian rites, recognizing them as secular practices.⁹ This decision reflected a long-term analysis and a shift in the nature of these rites, which had become more cultural than religious. During the Second Vatican Council, these practices were officially declared compatible with Church teachings.

⁹ The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, Pietro Fumasoni-Biondi. 1992. Instruction Concerning Certain Ceremonies and the Oath about the Chinese Rites. In 100 Roman Documents Relating to the Chinese Rites Controversy (1645–1941). Ed. R. R. Noll, 88–89. San Francisco: Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History.

Contemporary Relevance of the Controversy

The Chinese Rites Controversy represents one of the most significant conflicts in the history of relations between the Catholic Church and China. It highlights tensions between the universal principles of Christianity and the necessity of adapting these principles to local cultural traditions. Simultaneously, the controversy profoundly influenced the development of the theology of inculturation, which seeks to adapt religious practices to specific cultural contexts.

Decisions made by the Church in the 20th century regarding Chinese rites set an important precedent, shaping its relationship with other cultures globally, particularly in Asia. The controversy had long-lasting consequences for both the Catholic Church and the interaction between Christianity and Chinese culture.

The ban on Chinese rites left a deep imprint on Church-China relations, weakening the position of Catholic missions in the country. The Qing authorities, particularly after Emperor Kangxi's reign, viewed Catholicism as a threat to China's cultural and political sovereignty. Consequently, Catholic missions in China virtually collapsed for over a century. During this period, the number of adherents drastically declined, and the Church was forced underground. Additionally, a specific doctrine of "Chineseness" emerged, emphasizing cultural, political, and legal distinctiveness from the Western world, including Christianity.

Another key outcome was the impact on the theology of inculturation. The Chinese Rites Controversy became one of the first instances where the Church had to address the challenge of adapting its doctrine to foreign cultures. The decisions made in the 20th century by Pope Pius XII and the Second Vatican Council shaped a new approach to inculturation, recognizing that certain cultural practices, though externally different, could align with Christian principles.

These decisions laid the groundwork for a deeper understanding of other religious traditions. The Church acknowledged that dialogue and comprehension are essential for evangelization. In Asia, where Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have deeply rooted traditions, adaptation and respect for local customs have become vital.

The controversy significantly influenced politics, revealing the profound tensions between the Church and the Qing monarchy. The Holy See's interference in China's internal affairs was perceived as part of Western colonial pressure. This perception reinforced Chinese distrust of Christianity as a vehicle of foreign influence, a challenge the Church in China continues to face today. Additionally, the controversy became a stage for the power struggles of Western nations – Spain, Portugal, France, and the papacy – as well as religious orders within the Church.

These dynamics laid the foundation for modern Chinese skepticism toward Christianity.¹⁰ Current Chinese policies nurture grievances against historical Christianity, perpetuating a “list of wrongs” allegedly inflicted by Catholicism.¹¹

The Chinese Rites Controversy also spurred the development of sinology and oriental studies in Europe and increased interest in foreign cultures. In Europe, it deepened knowledge of non-Western traditions. In contrast, as noted by Li Tiangang, China experienced a return to the “Chinese center,” closing itself off from Western influences, which led to intellectual stagnation.¹²

The repercussions of the Chinese Rites Controversy extended beyond China. It served as a cautionary tale for missionaries operating in other parts of the world, such as Japan, Korea, India, and Latin America. It demonstrated that a lack of understanding of local cultures and traditions could lead to conflicts that undermine evangelization efforts.

After formally resolving the controversy and revising its stance, the Catholic Church began rebuilding its relationship with China. Although the new guidelines facilitated Catholics’ integration into Confucian traditions, the revival of Catholic missions in China faced new challenges, particularly under the Communist regime after 1949.

Contemporary Debates

The Chinese Rites Controversy holds both symbolic and practical significance today. It underscores the importance of respecting cultural diversity and fostering dialogue between cultures and religions. The modern Catholic Church, particularly in its relationship with China, draws lessons from this historical conflict, striving to avoid imposing foreign models of faith.

While relations between the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China remain strained, the Chinese Rites Controversy serves as a reminder that adaptation, respect, and cooperation can lead to deeper understanding and mutual acceptance. In an era of globalization, the Church continues to seek

¹⁰ 何岩巍 (He Yanwei). 2021. “中国礼仪之争的缘起与中西学统的关系 [The Origins of the Chinese Rites Controversy and the Relationship Between Chinese and Western Traditions of Learning].” 普世社会科学研究网 [Pushi Institute for Social Sciences]. (1.12.2024) <http://www.paciltion.com/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=2936>.

¹¹ 国务院 [State Council of the People’s Republic of China]. 2005. “中国宗教概况 [Overview of Religion in China].” 中华人民共和国中央人民政府门户网站 [The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China Official Portal]. (1.12.2024) https://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2005-06/22/content_2582714.htm.

¹² 李天纲 (Li Tiangang). 2021. “中国礼仪之争：20年间的思考 [The Chinese Rites Controversy: Reflections on 20 Years].” 海交史 (Haijiaoshi). (1.12.2024) <https://www.haijiaoshi.com/archives/6766>.

a balance between the universal message of the Gospel and local cultures and traditions.

According to Ji Jianxun (纪建勋), a professor at East China Normal University in Shanghai, the relevance of the Chinese Rites Controversy in contemporary academic debates lies in the Chinese concept of *shén dào shè jiào* (神道设教),¹³ which integrates religious elements with moral and social education. This dual character of Chinese tradition – combining religion (*shén jiào*, 神教) with moral teaching (*wén jiào*, 文教) – explains why practices like ancestor veneration and Confucian worship have been regarded in China as social rather than religious rituals.¹⁴ Understanding the significance of the controversy is critical for addressing the profound cultural differences between the Chinese and Western worlds.¹⁵

Professor He Yanwei (何岩巍) from the Institute of History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences highlights a paradoxical paradigm established by the controversy: unity in cultural diversity, which necessitates ongoing internal dialogue between theology, liturgy, and the practices of believers. The controversy contributed to the development of modern mission theology in the Catholic Church and helped overcome Western ethnocentrism within the Church, enabling a better understanding of and response to the needs of diverse cultural communities. This acknowledgment – that Western norms are not universal – is particularly evident during the pontificate of Pope Francis.¹⁶

Professor Yang Fenggang (杨凤岗), a frequent critic of the lack of religious freedom in China, asserts that the controversy equipped Christianity with tools to address the complex issues it faces in China today, including modernity, nationalism, and traditional culture. Christianity must navigate modernization while confronting the rise of science and social rationalism. Its coexistence with Chinese nationalism requires resolving historical tensions between religion and

¹³ “The Divine Way as a Method of Teaching.” This phrase originates from classical Chinese philosophy and Confucian thought. It conveys the idea that authority or governance employs religion, symbols of divinity, and ceremonies to impart moral values and social principles. This concept is closely tied to the integration of religion with social and political order in traditional China.

¹⁴ 纪建勋 (Ji Jianxun). 2019. “‘中国礼仪之争’的缘起和中西学统的关系 [The Origins of the ‘Chinese Rites Controversy’ and the Relationship Between Chinese and Western Traditions of Learning].” Sohu. (1.12.2024) https://www.sohu.com/a/305406772_501394.

¹⁵ 芮文翔 (Rui Wenxiang), 纪建勋 (Ji Jianxun). 2019. “中国礼仪之争与中西礼学” 前沿研究国际工作坊综述 [Summary of the International Workshop on ‘The Chinese Rites Controversy and Sino-Western Ritual Studies’]. 国际比较文学 [International Comparative Literature]. (1.12.2024) <https://icl.shnu.edu.cn/news/huodong/d67c13cb-0522-4210-868a-33736b330d05.htm>.

¹⁶ 何岩巍 (He Yanwei). “中国礼仪之争的缘起与中西学统的关系 [The Origins of the Chinese Rites Controversy and the Relationship Between Chinese and Western Traditions of Learning].”

the state. Additionally, Christianity must find a harmonious relationship with Confucianism and other indigenous Chinese traditions.¹⁷

The Chinese Rites Controversy reinforced the perception that Christianity (and Islam) are carriers of foreign cultures. The proposed solution to this issue has been the large-scale sinicization of religion, championed by Zhuo Xinping (卓新平),¹⁸ a former director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and president of the Chinese Religious Studies Association. His views are echoed by Bishop Ma Yinglin (马英林), Chairman of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.¹⁹ Sinicization entails integrating religious practices with Chinese culture, socialist values, and national policy. This process is understood as a vital element in building a harmonious society and achieving the national rejuvenation of China amid global transformations.

The modern approach to sinicization emphasizes its role in fostering unity among religion, culture, and politics, as well as its importance for China's modernization. However, the current sinicization campaign faces criticism from Christians within and beyond China, as it is perceived as a political tool aimed at subordinating Christianity to the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party, rather than as an authentic attempt at religious inculturation.²⁰

Zhuo Xinping, in an interview featured in a documentary film, responds to questions from the host regarding Chinese Catholicism. This dialogue, expressed in simple terms, reflects the contemporary relevance of the Chinese Rites Controversy:

Christianity has a certain connection with the political power of the West. There remain issues between the political authority of Western countries and China to this day. Christianity is expected to play a role in resolving these problems, though what that role might be remains unclear.

¹⁷ 杨凤岗 (Yang Fenggang). 2022. “基督教在中国所面对的重大挑战——现代性、民族主义和传统文化 [The Major Challenges Christianity Faces in China: Modernity, Nationalism, and Traditional Culture].” 普世社会科学研究网 [Pushi Institute for Social Sciences]. (1.12.2024) <http://pacilution.com/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=5630>.

¹⁸ 卓新平 (Zhuo Xinping). 2023. “中国宗教更新与社会现代化 [Religious Renewal in China and Social Modernization].” 爱思想网 [Aisixiang]. (1.12.2024) <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/136952.html>; 卓新平 (Zhuo Xinping). 2013. 基督教与中国文化处境 [Christianity and the Chinese Cultural Context] (基督教中国化研究丛书 [Studies on the Sinicization of Christianity Series]). 北京 [Beijing]: 宗教文化出版社 [Religious Culture Press].

¹⁹ 马英林 (Ma Yinglin). 2017. “天主教中国化 (本地化) 的历史经验和未来展望 [Historical Experiences and Future Prospects of the Sinicization (Localization) of Catholicism in China].” 中华文化学院 [Chinese Culture Institute]. (1.12.2024) <https://www.zhwhxy.org.cn/article/315hyF0770E>.

²⁰ 郭宝生 (Guo Baosheng). 2017. “基督教中国化运动剖析 [Analysis of the Sinicization Movement of Christianity].” ChinaAid. (1.12.2024) https://www.chinaaid.net/2017/02/blog-post_79.html.

Are there issues with recognizing the Pope as the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church?

Originally, there were no such issues. However, the accommodation controversy – a conflict between the Pope and the Chinese Emperor – brought them to light. On one side, there is political authority; on the other, religious authority. What role the Pope should play in China today remains highly uncertain.

Is there fear of the Pope?

No. However, in our understanding, Chinese Catholics should first and foremost be Chinese, and only then Catholics. In Western thought, one must first be a Catholic and only afterward a citizen of a particular country. This divergence stems from differing traditions. Chinese tradition places great emphasis on national identity. This unity is very important to the Chinese people.²¹

What might an agreement between the Vatican and China look like?

There are differences of opinion on both sides. For the Vatican, religious freedom and spiritual authority are primary concerns. For the Chinese side, national interest and identity take precedence, with the political aspect coming before the religious. To this day, no compromise or agreement has been reached. This remains our challenge.²²

This televised dialogue highlights an impasse rooted in differing interpretations of Christianity's role in China and the West. A similar perspective from the Chinese government extends to other religions, particularly Tibetan Buddhism²³.

Conclusion

The Chinese Rites Controversy, though rooted in the realities of the 17th and 18th centuries, remains a vivid example of the tensions between Christianity's universal claims and the local cultural traditions it encounters. It poses the question of how religion can adapt to foreign cultures while preserving its doctrinal integrity and identity. Contemporary realities demonstrate that the questions raised during this conflict are still relevant, particularly in the context

²¹ Monika Kovacsics, Stefan Degert. Dir. 2008. *Kontrollierter Glaube – Religion in China*. Digital Video (Broadcast), Documentary Film. PHOENIX, 28 min.

²² *Kontrollierter Glaube – Religion in China*, 40 min.

²³ Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki. 2014. *Tolerancja religijna w prawie chińskim [Religious Tolerance in Chinese Law]*. In *Oblicza tolerancji i nietolerancji religijnej. Aspekty prawno-historyczne i teologiczne [The Faces of Religious Tolerance and Intolerance: Legal-Historical and Theological Aspects]*. (Ekumenizm i Integracja 30). Eds. Piotr Jaskóła et al., 317–327. Opole: Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego.

of globalization, China's rising significance on the international stage, and interreligious relations.

The pontificate of Pope Francis has introduced new dynamics into the relationship between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China. In 2018, a provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops in China was reached, aiming to reduce tensions between the underground and official Church. Although criticized for its lack of transparency and effectiveness, this agreement reflects the Vatican's willingness to engage in dialogue with Chinese authorities, even under challenging political circumstances. Pope Francis described it as "imperfect but functioning," highlighting a pragmatic understanding of these delicate relations.

Nevertheless, the reality of Chinese Catholics remains complex. Repression against the faithful, particularly those operating outside official Church structures, underscores the challenges in achieving full religious freedom in China. The process of sinicizing religion, vigorously promoted by Chinese authorities, reveals that inculturation in this context often serves as a political tool rather than an authentic expression of cultural dialogue. This highlights the tensions between the universal mission of the Church and China's need to safeguard its cultural sovereignty.

Drawing lessons from the Chinese Rites Controversy, the Catholic Church continues to develop the theology of inculturation, striving to respect cultural diversity and local traditions.²⁴ This controversy teaches that true Christian universality does not consist of imposing one culture but of harmonizing faith with the diversity of human experience. Pope Francis, through his diplomatic efforts, demonstrates that dialogue and cooperation, though difficult, are achievable and aimed at pursuing the common good within diversity.

While the relationship between the Vatican and China remains strained, the history of the Chinese Rites Controversy underscores that compromise and collaboration are possible if both sides commit to dialogue. In the face of global challenges, the Church must remember this lesson, advocating respect for cultural diversity and values shared by all humanity.

The Chinese Rites Controversy is not merely a distant historical episode but an important reminder that every culture contributes uniquely to Christianity's universal message. This represents both a task and a challenge for contemporary theologians, missionaries, and religious leaders to draw inspiration from this history to build stronger relationships among religions, cultures, and nations.

²⁴ Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki (柯達理). 2012. 中国的神学。Teologia chińska. Uwarunkowania kulturowe pojęć trynitarnych [Chinese theology. Cultural determinants of the Trinity concepts]. (Ekumenizm i Integracja, 27). Opole: Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego.

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